

# Wang Huning, The Cultural Revolution and Reform of China's Political System

*Wang Huning, "Reflections on the Cultural Revolution and the Reform of China's Political System"[1]*

**Introduction by Matthew D. Johnson and Translation by David Ownby**

## *Introduction*

Wang Huning (b. 1955) is widely viewed as China's most powerful intellectual. He has directly served the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee under three successive leaders: Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping. He is currently the fifth-ranked member of the Party's seven-man Politburo Standing Committee and directs the Central Secretariat, effectively making him Xi Jinping's deputy in managing day-to-day Party affairs.

Although Wang's role is succinctly described outside of China as that of an "ideologue," in reality he also serves on a range of central Party commissions that drive policymaking in areas such as political-legal affairs, cybersecurity, finance, Party-building, official appointments, and military-civil fusion. Given his depth of experience and proximity to Xi, it is possible that Wang will rise even higher within the Party hierarchy when the 20th Party Congress meets in October 2022.

Wang Huning's influence within the Party is attributable to his insights into how to secure socialism against the forces of Western globalization. Early on in his academic career at Fudan University, Wang diagnosed weaknesses in China's system as the chief threat to socialism's continued survival. These included the lack of a more inclusive "political technology" of Party-state organization suited to China's national conditions; the lack of a unified political culture; and vulnerability to Western cultural hegemony imported through foreign trade and other forms of soft international power.

Wang produced much of his most important writing between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s – a period when China's political economy and foreign relations were all being transformed by deeper integration with the world economy. Within this process of "reform and opening," no country loomed larger than the United States, which Wang visited in 1988.

His record of that journey, *America Against America* (Shanghai Arts Press, 1991), was published in the aftermath of the Tiananmen massacre and political crackdown of 1989, both praised and criticized American society, and established Wang's reputation as a trenchant analyst of democracies. Notably, Wang's impression of the U.S. was of a country in crisis, which he attributed to irreconcilable tensions between forces of unity and individualism. Writing at the height of economic competition between the U.S. and Japan, he seemed to predict that Japan's "collectivism" (集体主义) provided a model for it and other countries to challenge the global position of the U.S. for decades to come.

Variations on the twin themes of global counter-hegemonism and domestic statism appear in every major Party theory from the Mao Zedong era to the present. Nonetheless, Wang Huning's intellectually rigorous appraisals offered a persuasive framework for reconstructing post-Mao politics because they directly contradicted the inevitability of liberal democracy, using examples drawn directly from the post-Cold War economic successes of countries other than the United States. In other words, they credibly and convincingly told China's leaders what they wanted to hear.

As one of China's leading "neo-authoritarian" establishment intellectuals during the late 1980s, Wang constructed a China-specific version of modernization theory inspired by American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington, which he used as a lens for diagnosing internal Party organizational issues such as corruption, center-local institutional relations, and the preservation of political order amidst economic development.[2]

The sweep of his expertise, coupled with an interpretive arc that bent toward legitimization of highly centralized socialism as a political system, attracted the attention of Party leaders Wu Bangguo 吴邦国 (b. 1941) and Jiang Zemin, who are credited with having ordered his transfer to the Party's internal policy think tank – the Central Policy Research Office (CPRO). Wang became the CPRO's director in 2002, a position he held until relinquishing it to his protégé Jiang Jinqian 江金权 (b. 1959) in 2020. During this time he joined the Party Secretariat in 2002; the Politburo in 2007; and Politburo Standing Committee in 2017.

Proximity to the halls of power in Zhongnanhai have made the post-1990s evolution of Wang Huning's thinking more difficult to reconstruct. A likely hypothesis is that his Huntington-esque structural-functionalism has become indistinguishable from the dominant ideology of the Party itself. Wang is widely credited with having contributed to the major theories of each of the Party leaders he has served: Jiang Zemin's "Three Represents," Hu Jintao's "New Development Concept," and Xi Jinping's "China Dream of the Great Revival of the Chinese Nation and "Xi

Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.”

He was also, at least during its early phase, identified as an influence on the Belt and Road Initiative.[3] The common denominator of all of these theories – and, as noted by numerous observers, behind much of Wang’s work[4] – is the shared vision of a China in which the Party rules indefinitely, and of a world in which China is a more influential power.

This means that Wang has also become widely equated with China’s more combative strategic turn under Xi – a view that is undeniably credible given Wang’s history of rejection of Western globalization and all that it portends for China’s future if left unchecked. Yet a key piece of his thinking that is downplayed in profiles of Wang as a hardline, if ideologically tinged, power politician is his view of culture – expressed as “tradition,” “values,” or “civilization” – as an independent factor in determining political outcomes.

As an intellectual, Wang is therefore one in a long line of thinkers who have identified modernization as a process in permanent tension with the shared belief systems that bind human communities together. Viewed from the perspective of political order, modernization is desirable only insofar it can be counterbalanced with the creation of new value systems whose functional role is to keep institutions strong and societies governable. Strong states are culturally unified states. For an establishment intellectual in the context of CCP-ruled China, this means preserving and centralizing Party authority; renovating and expanding faith in Party socialism; and recalibrating globalization to make the international system more conducive to Party survival.

Wang is an “ideologue” in the sense that his views emphasize the importance of homogenizing values to conform to the Party Center’s strategic interests regardless of domain – in other words, his role as an official is not confined solely to propaganda or ideological education. At the same time, it is clearly no accident that Wang’s rise through the political ranks has coincided with an increasingly urgent emphasis on political belief and unity of purpose within the Party (e.g. the “Remember the Mission” campaign and political rectification of the Party’s internal security apparatus); orchestrated veneration of Xi Jinping and Xi Jinping Thought; and the enforced cultural cleansing carried out among religious communities and along China’s ethnic frontiers.

For all of these reasons, Wang’s role in China’s history may end up being that of another would-be “engineer of the soul,”[5] who for both political and nationalistic reasons envisions the salvation of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics as attainable only through the unceasing transformation of those who live within and beneath it.

The text translated here, Wang's "Reflections on the Cultural Revolution and Reform of the Political System," published in 1986, is his first major statement on how China's post-Mao political re-engineering should be achieved. This essay is only superficially an analysis of the Cultural Revolution's causes. Its main purpose is to use the threat of Cultural Revolution-like political disorder as a springboard for proposing that the Chinese Communist Party strengthen its own internal systems of leadership and accountability, starting with the rules that govern political behavior:

"It would seem that a sound, healthy political system should have been able to prevent the Cultural Revolution, which was initiated, organized, and carried out outside of the scope of the constitution and the law, and did not conform to the scientific, democratic political process. However, the political system at the time did not have this capacity. The political system established by the 1954 Constitution was destroyed by the Cultural Revolution in one fell swoop. This is something that deserves our careful study."

Within the context of 1980s China, what Wang's invocation of "the constitution and the law" has two separate meanings: the protection of individuals from unlimited political power, and the protection of dissenting voices within the Party from autocratic persecution and attack. In Wang's view, the Cultural Revolution – its violence and "civil upheaval" leading to disaster – was the direct outcome of a political system that lacked the capacity to defend itself from Mao Zedong and his supporters. What could have prevented this outcome, he argues, was an external authority capable of enforcing existing laws to restrain the excesses of Mao's dictatorship. In other words, a national constitution and internal principles of "collective leadership" and "democratic centralism."

There is, however, an unresolved tension in Wang's argument. On one hand he claims that Cultural Revolution-era political life "lacked a rigorous system to protect citizens' rights," which he calls both "democracy" and the "rule of law"; on the other hand he claims that the Party "neglected the work of how to use political technology to build a democratic legal system." The tension between these two statements lies in the subtle distinction between effective rights protection and effective creation of political technology - a classic contrast of ends and means rationality. Somewhat revealingly, Wang's first concern is with building checks and balances within the Party, in order to strengthen the system of political power itself. Failure to adopt these measures, he warns, would potentially lead to destruction of the political system by "civil strife" if the Cultural Revolution were to repeat itself.

Secondarily, Wang is concerned with making Party-state governance more accountable and efficient, especially at the local levels, in order to win over popular support. Along the way, he makes an interesting observation that the Cultural Revolution itself was caused by political mismanagement and abuse:

“One social reason that made the Cultural Revolution possible was the widespread lack of a tradition of respect for citizens’ rights to democracy, freedom, and human rights. Civil unrest like the Cultural Revolution, which violated citizens’ rights to democracy and human rights, would not have happened in a society where every citizen believes in democracy and where any violation of citizens’ rights to democracy and human rights is punished by law and condemned by society. Both the lack of a strong sense of democracy and the rule of law in society, and the inability of the political system to effectively punish violations of citizens’ democratic and human rights, served as social conditions for the launching of the Cultural Revolution.”

His proposed solution, however, is again both political and technical – that “we” (i.e. the Party) make use of “political projects” in order to work out a more rational integration of social and political life. At base, Wang’s definition of democracy prioritizes relationships between institutions of power and authority, which account for six of his seven Cultural Revolution “reflections”, over the establishment more robust individual and collective rights vis-à-vis the Party-state.

In the essay’s final stanzas, Wang concludes that the goal of political reform is to “ensure, from a technical perspective, that all aspects of the political system can function reasonably and effectively ... Through systematic political engineering, we can make our political system highly democratic, with a well-established legal system and an efficient political system.” This statement poses a tacit question for readers – who are the engineers? In light of Wang’s preceding analysis, the strongest answer is that reform is first and foremost a process carried out by the Party and for the Party. Mao and other Cultural Revolution leaders may have been the causes of “turmoil”, but their errors were a deviation along the path to political modernization, not inevitable outcomes of one-party rule. To return modernization to its proper course, Wang further proposes “research and analysis to discover and create political technology that will be applicable to China’s national conditions.” Never, however, does he question socialism: “a perfect socialist political system can be built only by studying and adopting scientific and rational political technologies found throughout the world.”

The most important lesson of the Cultural Revolution is therefore that the Party must be technologically strengthened further for the sake of its own continued survival. Though here Wang is describing “technology” in a broad sense, as scientific problem-solving at the scale an

entire system (or, in Wang's terms, "material and spiritual civilization"), today his words could be interpreted as anticipating one of the most striking features of China's post-Mao political evolution – technological modernization of governance in a narrower sense (e.g. information networks, data, and surveillance tools) coupled with fortification of the Party's position as an unassailably absolute sovereign.

### *Translation of text*

Twenty years ago, the Chinese people suffered the disaster of the Cultural Revolution. Ten years ago we turned the page on this catastrophe. However, we should still reflect on that civil upheaval from time to time, to prevent such a disaster from recurring.

A people should treat its most painful lessons as a mirror, keeping the mirror clean and looking in it frequently, so that generation after generation does not repeat the same mistakes and the people as a whole can continue to move forward. The Cultural Revolution did not happen by accident. In terms of ideas, we failed to shift the focus of work to economic construction in a timely manner, continued to insist on the ideological line of "taking class struggle as the key link," despite the fact that the exploiting class had been basically eliminated, and adopted the ideological line of "creative destruction破字当头,"[6] all of which were direct causes in terms of our thinking at the time. However, in the absence of certain conditions, the Cultural Revolution could not have occurred. In addition to historical, social, economic and cultural factors, an imperfect and unsound political system is a factor that cannot be underestimated.

Reflecting on the Cultural Revolution from the perspective of the political system is a particularly important part of summarizing the lessons of the Cultural Revolution. In recent years, people have analyzed the Cultural Revolution from any number of perspectives, including thought, ideology, culture, and the economy, but not enough has been done from the perspective of the political system.

Political systems often improve as a result of thinking about instances of political turmoil. No political system is perfect at the moment of its creation. It must recognize its own shortcomings and deficiencies in the course of its operations, practice, and the upheavals it encounters, and then move toward improvement and eventual perfection. Without this gradual process, a political system's ingrained bad habits may be difficult to change. The Cultural Revolution was certainly a catastrophe, but it also provides us with a basis for examining our political system. Today, as we embark on political reform, it is useful and necessary to reflect deeply on the Cultural

Revolution from the perspective of the political system, learning from the past and preparing for the future.

It would seem that a sound, healthy political system should have been able to prevent the Cultural Revolution, which was initiated, organized, and carried out outside of the scope of the constitution and the law, and did not conform to the scientific, democratic political process. However, the political system at the time did not have this capacity. The political system established by the 1954 Constitution was destroyed by the Cultural Revolution in one fell swoop. This is something that deserves our careful study. Setting other reasons aside for the moment, let's reflect on the Cultural Revolution from the perspective of the political system. A technical analysis of the political system reveals that the structure and function of some of the following elements help to explain why the Culture Revolution was not stopped.

First, the ruling party that constitutes the core leadership of our political life does not have a healthy internal democratic system. Our Party led the Chinese people through bloody battles and difficult struggles, establishing the socialist system and creating the lofty political prestige the Party enjoys; the Party exercises full leadership rights in our social and political life, which is appropriate for our path of development.

However, following subsequent changes in the situation and a misunderstanding of social class relations under conditions of socialism, the understanding of democracy by Party leaders at that time gradually declined, and "a work style based in subjectivism and individual dictatorship became increasingly serious and increasingly overruled the Party Center, so that the principles of collective leadership and democratic centralism in the political life of the Party and the state were constantly weakened to the point of destruction." [2] (Resolution on Certain Historical Problems of the Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China).

Consequently, on the eve of the launch of the Cultural Revolution, the actual situation was as follows: the Party had overall political leadership over social life, and Party leaders had absolute leadership authority over the Party. Therefore, when Party leaders mistakenly decided to launch the Cultural Revolution, many cadres and Party members in our Party who disagreed were powerless to do anything about it. The inadequacy of the Party's internal democratic system made it impossible for the Party to prevent the wrongful act of launching the Cultural Revolution, which resulted in damage to the political life of the entire country.

Second, the National People's Congress, the organ of state power, was unable to exercise its

power effectively and efficiently. The National People's Congress, as the highest organ of state power, should have had the solemn right to speak out and decide on the launching of a nationwide political movement like the Cultural Revolution. But in fact, soon after the start of the Cultural Revolution, the National People's Congress and local People's Congresses no longer functioned, and national leaders such as the Chairman were sidelined, and some were even persecuted and killed. The organs of state power had no ability to constrain this political upheaval involving China's future destiny.

This, of course, had to do with the absence of a strict division of labor between the Party and the government. The absence of this division of labor meant the absence of checks and balances in the political system as well. Without mechanisms of countervailing power, society pays a heavy price when one element changes direction.

Third, there is a lack of strong constitutional guarantees in political life. The way in which the Cultural Revolution occurred and developed was in fact totally inconsistent with the spirit of our Constitution and its regulations, and the practices and methods employed during the Cultural Revolution were also completely unconstitutional. The Constitution dictates the status and authority of the National People's Congress and the basic procedures of the political life of the country. However, the Cultural Revolution simply "destroyed everything" and "seized all powers" without following any procedures, thus consigning state organs to paralysis.

The Constitution outlines the rights and duties of the Chairman, of deputies to the National People's Congress, and of citizens, but these rights and duties received no guarantee at all during the Cultural Revolution. The absence of a mechanism whose specific function was to make good on constitutional guarantees was also a condition for the Cultural Revolution.

Fourth, there was the lack of an independent judicial system. During the Cultural Revolution, there were many violations of the law, but no institutions that could actually exercise restraint. There were two aspects to this. First, there was no system to handle administrative complaints, and thus no place to deposit grievances against government agencies that infringed on citizens' rights and individual freedoms; government agencies controlled by the Gang of Four and their henchmen could do whatever they wanted, and there was nothing citizens could do about it.

Second, the Cultural Revolution destroyed the general system for dealing with complaints, which meant that citizens had nowhere to file grievances about violations of their rights and interests, resulting in considerable beating, smashing, and looting, which constituted serious violations of



human rights and human dignity. In addition, the public prosecution and law enforcement agencies were merged, and used to implement the Cultural Revolution, with no consideration of judicial independence. This meant that the Cultural Revolution became increasingly violent over time.

Fifth, the political system lacked a proper mechanism to decentralize vertical power. After 1949, for historical reasons, i.e., our long-standing political, economic, and cultural backwardness, and also because of following the Soviet model, our system came to be highly centralized system. This system had a positive side, in promoting the economic development of an underdeveloped society, but it also created a latent possibility in our political life, meaning that a mistake at the top could wind up implicating society as a whole. Local areas do not have much jurisdictional competence and do not have legal autonomy over decisions made at higher levels.

If local authorities were granted certain powers, to be exercised without interference, in accordance with the Constitution, then in the event of civil unrest such as the Cultural Revolution, local areas might avoid being dragged into a wrong-headed political upheaval, nor could general institutions force local governments to act contrary to the Constitution. The lack of such mechanisms meant that local governments were powerless in the face of the Cultural Revolution.

Sixth, there was no healthy system for the hiring and employment of state workers. Any activity undertaken by a political system, whether the activity be constitutional or not, requires a certain number of people to carry out the activity. When the Cultural Revolution occurred, the absence of a strict and rigorous system regarding the hiring and employment of state workers allowed the Gang of Four to persecute good and loyal workers and replace them with people who were loyal to the Gang of Four. State employees, especially those with certain political responsibilities, should be appointed or dismissed through proper procedures, and cadres should not be appointed or hired haphazardly, as was the case during the Cultural Revolution.

All state employees at a significant level should be appointed or dismissed by the authorities. If the cadre system had ensured that cadres trusted by the people would assume political responsibilities, they might have been able to resist the Cultural Revolution to a certain extent. However, this system was not firmly in place at the time of the Cultural Revolution, so that the cadre system, which might have been effective in times of stability, became a major disadvantage in times of civil unrest.

Seventh, political life lacked a rigorous system to protect citizens' rights. Although the Cultural Revolution was a political upheaval that threatened the entire political system, it was also a disaster inflicted on the people. One social reason that made the Cultural Revolution possible was the widespread lack of a tradition of respect for citizens' rights to democracy, freedom, and human rights. Civil unrest like the Cultural Revolution, which violated citizens' rights to democracy and human rights, would not have happened in a society where every citizen believes in democracy and where any violation of citizens' rights to democracy and human rights is punished by law and condemned by society. Both the lack of a strong sense of democracy and the rule of law in society, and the inability of the political system to effectively punish violations of citizens' democratic and human rights, served as social conditions for the launching of the Cultural Revolution.

Clearly, even if we limit ourselves to the perspective of political technology, the above-mentioned items are not comprehensive, but nonetheless cover the basics. The political development of a society can be regarded as a project—a political project. Political projects provide effective techniques and conditions for social and political activities and relationships, and ensure that social and political life unfolds according to the principles and methods that the people have chosen. Certain political ideals, concepts, and principles can only be realized effectively and efficiently through well thought out political projects. Without such projects, it is difficult for political principles to work themselves out in practice. Political projects require political technology.

Thinking about the Cultural Revolution, people have come to the conclusion that in the past, we neglected the development and application of political technology. The victory of the New Democratic Revolution and the Socialist Revolution provided the basic conditions for the realization of the people's democratic dictatorship. But for a long time we neglected the work of how to use political technology to build a democratic legal system, and as a consequence, when the Cultural Revolution occurred, there was no sound political system to intervene and put an end to it, and instead, the system itself was quickly destroyed by civil strife. This profound historical lesson is worth learning.

Beginning about ten years ago, we began to pay considerable attention to this issue and took a series of constructive measures to improve the political system. In recent years, we have also focused on the reform of the political system. Through the above analysis, we see that an important direction for the reform of our political system is to ensure, from a technical perspective, that all aspects of the political system can function reasonably and effectively, including the relationship between the Party and the government, the relationships between various powers, the system of constitutional guarantees, the judicial system, the relationship between centralized and local powers, the cadre system and the democratization of society, etc.

Through systematic political engineering, we can make our political system highly democratic, with a well-established legal system and an efficient political system.

Having reflected on the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution, people have come to feel deeply that we should greatly develop our study of political technology in order to realize socialist democracy and the rule of law. On the one hand, this will involve thorough research and analysis to discover and create political technology that will be applicable to China's national conditions. On the other hand, we should compare and borrow from the political technologies employed by other countries throughout the world, including countries with similar socio-political systems and countries with different socio-political systems, adopting what is reasonable and scientific.

Different socio-political systems function according to different political principles, which are generally not interchangeable. But as political systems, all human communities face similar social questions and needs, as well as the same contradictions and problems. Some of the political technologies adopted to meet these needs and solve these problems are interchangeable. Economic management techniques from different economic systems can be imported, and the same is true for politics: certain methods developed in different systems can be imported or adapted. Of course, all societies have their own particular historical-social-cultural conditions. But a perfect socialist political system can be built only by studying and adopting scientific and rational political technologies found throughout the world.

Prior to the Cultural Revolution, for various reasons, we did not do this. Today, in the great process of modernizing our country, we clearly understand that we need to establish a solid political system, a fully democratic socialist system. Only this will ensure that the tragedy of the Cultural Revolution not be repeated, and our material and spiritual civilization will achieve unprecedented development.

#### Notes

[1], 王沪宁, "'文革'反思与政治体制改革," originally published in the World Economic Herald 世界经济导报 on May 8, 1986, available online here at the Reform Data website.

[2] An excellent overview of neo-authoritarian views and their context is Jude Blanchette, "Wang Huning's Neo-Authoritarian Dream," October 20, 2017.

[3] Jane Perlez, “Behind the Scenes, Communist Strategist Presses China’s Rise,” The New York Times, November 13, 2017.

[4] See for example:

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323728204578513422637924256>;  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/26/world/asia/xi-jinping-china-president-inner-circle-western-officials.html>; <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2116964/wang-huning-low-profile-liberal-dream-weaver-whos-about>; <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/08/09/handling-of-us-trade-dispute-causes-rift-in-chinese-leadership-source.html>;  
<https://www.chinalawblog.com/2019/06/does-china-want-a-second-decoupling-the-chinese-texts-say-it-does.html>.

[5] See John Garnaut, “Engineers of the Soul: Ideology in Xi Jinping’s China,” Sinocism, January 16, 2019.

[6]Translator’s note: The longer phrase from which this comes is “destruction comes first, but creation is found within destruction破字当头，立在其中,” or “there is no creation without destruction, begin with destruction you will find creation within不破不立，破字当头，立在其中.”

[7]Translator’s note: In the original text of the Resolution, the subject of the quoted sentence is Mao Zedong: “Comrade Mao Zedong’s prestige reached a peak and he began to get arrogant at the very time when the Party was confronted with the new task of shifting the focus of its work to socialist construction, a task for which the utmost caution was required. He gradually divorced himself from practice and from the masses, acted more and more arbitrarily and subjectively, and increasingly put himself above the Central Committee of the Party. The result was a steady weakening and even undermining of the principle of collective leadership and democratic centralism in the political life of the Party and the country.” Wang uses the quote without making a direct reference to Mao, although virtually all readers would have understood who was being discussed. Translation taken from the Wilson Center Digital Archive, pp. 17-18.